

“Help me explore my roots!”

More than 60% of us want to learn more about our family heritage—here, the pros share how to bring your family tree to life!

1 Get started at home!

Channel Barbara Walters!

“Interview the oldest members of your family,” says genealogist Angela McGhie. “Ask questions like, ‘Did anyone in our family serve in the military?’ When I started, I interviewed my grandmothers, asking them to share dates, places and stories, and I recorded the conversations for the next generation.”

Launch a local scavenger hunt!

“Explore your family history museum: your home,” says genealogist Megan Smolenyak. “Look for everything from photo albums to diplomas.” A surprising “artifact”? “The old family Bible,” she says. “Many Bibles have pages where people recorded events like births and marriages.”



Seek out supportive sleuths!

“For a fee of \$10 to \$50 a year, you can join your local genealogical society or the society that covers the area where your ancestors lived,” says genealogist Kimberly Powell. Not only will you gain access to online databases, you’ll get help from local genealogists. “They’ll tell you where to search locally, the best time to go and which clerk is the most knowledgeable or friendly.”

2 Expand your search!

Head to FamilySearch.org!

The preeminent site for family pedigrees? It's FamilySearch.org, agree our experts. “They have records, articles and data representing every state and country,” notes McGhie. “You can also see instructional videos on everything from how to research probate records to how to find family names.” Coming up empty when you type in your family name? Try various spellings and nicknames. Or try putting in a “wildcard”—an asterisk or question mark—for a mystery vowel. “Even Bob Hope’s name was spelled ‘Hape’ at Ellis Island!” notes Smolenyak.



Explore the new, improved Census!

A major event genealogists have been waiting 72 years for, “the 1940 census was just released this spring,” says McGhie. And, for the first time ever, the information is digitized, allowing amateur genealogists easy access. “You can learn about everything from ancestors’ birthplaces to their occupations going as far back as the 1790s,” says Powell. Go to FamilySearch.org for a link to free Census data.

Hunt down military records!

At Fold3.com, you can find military records dating back to the Revolutionary War. And that’s not all: Fold3.com has created basic pages for everyone enlisted in World War II. Anyone can log on—you don’t need a subscription—and add photos, stories or links, says McGhie, who created a page linking the records of five of her great-uncles!

Look at newspapers!

Use ChroniclingAmerica.loc.gov to find ancestors’ obituaries and more: “While researching singer Josh Groban’s roots,” says Smolenyak, “I found a letter his great-grandmother wrote to the editor when she was 10 years old!”

Hit government resources!

State archives and historical societies (find listings at Archives.gov) can be genealogical gold mines! “They offer everything from wills and land grants to vital records—birth, marriage and death certificates—to Civil War pensions,” Powell says.

3 Share your family tree!

Make a book!

Once you’ve collected your info, it’s time to share it. “In a 15-page book, I put a picture of each loved one on their own separate page and wrote a short paragraph telling an anecdote about that person,” shares McGhie. You don’t have to chronicle *everyone’s* story, she adds. “I did the same thing for my grandmother—made a book just about her—and gave it to everyone at her 90th birthday party.”

Tweet your tree!

“Tweet about your search or share what you’ve learned on Facebook!” urges Powell. “That way, anyone researching the same people can find you online, and they might just have the missing piece to your family puzzle!”

—Kristina Mastrocola



Our expert panel



Angela Packer McGhie—instructor for the National Institute on Genealogical Research—is the administrator of the Professional Genealogy Study Program and president of the National Capital Area Chapter of the Association of Professional Genealogists.



Genealogical sleuth **Megan Smolenyak** is the author of six books including *Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing!* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*



Genealogist **Kimberly Powell** is vice president of the Association of Professional Genealogists, and author of several books, including *The Everything Guide to Online Genealogy, 2nd edition*.